How to develop a learner-centered language curriculum

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Working definitions of learner-centered language teaching curriculum

How can we define a learner-centered language teaching curriculum? The basic concept will be illustrated as follows: it is such a curriculum as allowing learners to play a fuller and more active role in their language study (Tudor 1996: 1). The main idea underlying this concept as Tudor notes is that learners should be taken as the reference point for decision-making as regards both the content and the form of teaching, and that this should be achieved via a process of consultation and negotiation between teacher and learners (op. cit.: 21). David Nunan, one of the leading proponents of this approach, illustrates a distinctive feature of a learner-centered curriculum as follows: a learner-centered curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught (Nunan 1988: 2). Another illuminating conceptual outline of the learner-centeredness can be added by Nunan and Lamb (1996). They note that the learner-centered classrooms are those where learners are so actively involved in their own learning processes that decisions about what to learn and how to learn will be made with reference to the learners.

Shown above are some working definitions of a learner-centered language curriculum so that we can understand some fundamental concepts; that is, learners should be accorded a central role in their learning activities, most of which are to be determined according to information obtained through the needs analysis of the learners. Their learning content and methodology should be based on such data closely related to the learners themselves. However, this kind of illustration should not be taken to mean that there is no place for teachers in the classroom. Rather, teachers, according to Nunan (ibid.), should take a primary role in realizing such ideas. Apparently enough, teachers have a very important role to teach their learners in the whole process of learning activities to become good language learners and what they should do to accomplish their learning objectives. In short, teachers in the learner-centered language teaching context should (1) assist learners to proceed along their learning path toward their learning goals, and (2) provide needed aids and instruments for learners to become fully successful learners in generalized terms.

Pedagogical and managerial implications of the AMEP

How can a learner-centered curriculum be implemented? This can probably be explored by showing a practical example of a nation-wide curriculum innovation, which took place in Australia in 1980s. The Australian Adult (Im)Migrant Education Program (herein after shortened as the AMEP) is a federally funded English language
education program for immigrants and refugees. According to Nunan (1992: pp. 230-253), the National Curriculum Resource Center (NCRC) which was founded in 1984 as a teaching and research unit to facilitate school-based curriculum development, one of the important functions of this center was to help establish a localized (school-based) curriculum. The center's primary concern was how they could possibly assist to realize local initiative, that is, how they could show that each personnel could proceed relevant processes to achieve such objectives.

Until the early 1980s, the main idea of the AMEP curriculum was based on a classical "situational approach" and course materials were disseminated to each language center throughout the country. Another cause for the innovative project was a large influx of Southeast Asian refugees, which resulted in a huge diversity of the client group. The NCRC provided constructive and productive supports with recommendations of establishing the task force to tackle the immediate issues so as to explore workable resolutions. They came up with several practical supportive ideas, one of which was to survey practitioners' needs. Before and during this innovative project the concerned group of people embraced a needs-based philosophy that had been apparently influenced by the work of Council of Europe. The greatest concern observed among the relevant personnel was how to establish and maintain a bottom-up and school based approach for curriculum development. They also wished for not only pedagogical changes but also administrative and managerial improvement. Some 1,500 teachers and 300 large centers were involved in this project. Annual enrollments totaled 130,000.

The final solution accomplished by the task force was a four-stage implementing process. The first one was to provide the opportunities for each and every practitioner to work out their own research project based on their own interests. Interested teachers submitted research proposals, which showed areas and aspects of their practical and immediate concerns. For examples, many of the submissions were related to the development of the classroom tasks and activity types. Some were on learning styles and strategies. A coordinators shared common objectives in mind. One was to raise teachers' consciousness regarding curriculum. Another one was more technical and tactful. It was to obviate the distrust obtained by teachers in general.

In sum, the primary objective at this stage was to derive information, real and honest, from representative samples of practice. The second stage was to analyze the data obtained at the first stage. The database was developed so that every teacher and related personnel could gain access to relevant records. It proved that a majority of teachers showed the greatest concern to the second language acquisition research. This also created common areas which could be shared by teachers and advisers.

The third stage was to write out curriculum frameworks derived from the data yielded during the previous stages. The frameworks produced, basically through collaborative work by teachers and the project coordinators, made it possible for concerned teachers to plan, monitor, and evaluate their programs. Teachers were thus encouraged to go through the whole curriculum development process by documenting research projects, sharing their colleagues' problems and concerns, implementing their own plans, and evaluating the whole process. This entire process could be regarded as a systematized teacher development instrument.

Nunan (ibid.) noted in his summary of this project that numerous problems and difficulties were found. One anticipated problem was that some teachers and administrators showed resistance and disagreement. And it was also pointed that there was a relatively large qualitative discrepancy among research products. Another problem was that an appropriate evaluation was not carried out in a very precise and rigorous manner. There were more apparent and latent aspects in each phase of the project. Any educational program, especially of this kind, can hardly be free of
some defects. The AMEP, such a large scale language program, may not be treated and regarded equally as any form of local instance. However, there should be many things we can learn from this precedent example. One may be a systematic approach to curriculum renewal. It is noteworthy to mention that a parallel viewpoint may be adopted in looking at the relationship between teacher and learners in the classroom situation. Localization may equal individualization. Surveying teachers' interest areas may equal learners' needs assessment. Database sharing can be monitoring, modifying and adjusting teaching/learning activities. Evaluation can be negotiation and consultation. Next we will look at how a learner-centered curriculum can be developed throughout each planning stage.

**Curriculum planning procedures**

*Needs Analysis*

As briefly described in the previous section, the AMEP was a large-scale attempt to realize learner-centered principles in English Language Education in institutional settings through collaborative processes among teachers, researchers, administrators, and other relevant personnel. Efforts were made especially at the initial stages where critical problems and issues regarding the existing program needed to be identified. Among other pertinent aspects of the curriculum development was a survey of the practitioners' needs. The initial stage of the AMEP curriculum development began with the most immediate constraint, that is, teachers and their practical and professional concerns.

A pre-course planning procedure of learner-centered curriculum development is to collect various types of biographical data concerning learners. This data collection procedure is referred to as needs analysis or assessment. In learner-centered curriculum development, a strong emphasis is placed on needs analysis by which firstly, or usually before the program starts, learners' language proficiency is assessed so that they might be grouped appropriately. Needs analysis facilitates clarification of learners' subjective information as well. By learners' subjective information it is meant to include such affective domains as language learning goals, learning styles, interests, motivation, and many other personal characteristics. Language proficiency, educational background, sex, and other objective data are usually collected by means of simple questionnaires before the actual learning activities start, while subjective data are to be obtained as learning itself continues.

Objective needs derived result in the content specification while subjective needs are much more related with the methodology specification. In a learner-centered system, methodology, or how to learn or how to teach, is to be arranged or adjusted according to learners' subjective needs. Hence exploring learners' needs is a very important procedure, although learners can hardly articulate their own needs precisely. Here teachers need to take account of how to 'educate' learners to be aware of their own learning 'methods.' This can be realized through an ongoing process in classroom activities, which will be discussed in the following section.

*Content selection*

It would be ideal if a new program is constructed each time a new group of learners enroll. One recommendable approach is to prepare general course outlines by identifying recurring learner types. It might not be so radically inappropriate to prepare ready made sets of learning content if a relevant database of the learners in the previous terms (sessions) are utilized to prepare such general course outlines. Such outlines can be used as a basic learning content inventory with successive intakes of students.

Learner data are examined and information relating to learning purposes is extracted. Then curriculum designers will be able to provide a preliminary set of learners' communicative goals. Here are some possible sorts of goals, which are commonly expressed by a majority of Japanese
learners of English as follows:

"I would like to ......"
1. study abroad.
2. become a fluent speaker of English.
3. work at an office where English is used for communication.
4. enjoy American movies without subtitles.
5. enjoy reading novels and newspapers in English.
6. become an interpreter.

By studying such data, teachers or relevant personnel can identify the students’ communicative goals and get started to specify their communicative tasks and enabling skills. It is emphasized that learners themselves should be involved in prioritization through counseling and negotiation. These communicative goals can be grouped or categorized into subordinate tasks. For example, 1. studying abroad, 4. enjoying American movies without subtitles, and 6. becoming an interpreter are three of the goals shown above that relate to similar subordinate tasks and enabling skills listening comprehension.

The next important step is to contextualize the tasks by specifying topics, settings, interlocutors and so on. Such specifications obtained from needs analysis, will help produce a planning grid. A planning grid may vary on a wide scale depending on learners’ proficiency level, communicative goals and other traits. Regarding the linguistic content specification process, there is some debate as to whether linguistic elements are to be included. This can be viewed in a continuum dimensional grid as shown in Figure 1.

The degree of grammatical sequence is shown in the horizontal continuum, and the degree of explicit (conscious) grammar teaching is shown in the vertical continuum. Area (A) shows that a course is grammatically sequenced and the grammatical points are explicitly taught. In Area (B), grammatical sequence is sustained while the grammatical points are not explicitly taught. In area (C), grammatical sequence is loose while grammar is taught explicitly. Area (D) shows that neither of them is loose or maintained. Further empirical investigations are needed to clarify whether structurally graded courses and explicit grammar teaching lead to effective learning.

Grading content

Another difficult (problematic) issue is how to sequence the learning content. Following the previous section regarding the grammatical specification issue, area (A) or area (B) are supportive domains in which some theoretical rationales can be given. On the other hand, a learner-centered and other foregoing communicative language teaching approaches as well, face difficulty and complexity in deciding on grading content. These communication-oriented views conceive language learning as a process of learning to accomplish tasks with language. Levels of skill and task complexity consist of complex clusters of factors (Nunan 1988: 67). Some of them will include the following:

1. the degree to which the language event is embedded in a context which facilitates comprehension
2. the degree to which the language event makes cognitive demands on the learner

Figure 1.
Relative weighting of the degree of grammatical sequence and explicitness
3. the degree to which the background knowledge of the language user can be utilized to assist in comprehension
4. the amount of assistance provided to the language learner
5. the processing difficulty of the language
6. the degree of stress experienced by the learner in taking part in a language event

There must be other factors to determine task difficulty. Assimilated with task-based syllabus designing, learning content can be sequenced and graded according to learners' needs. In such an approach of selecting and sequencing content, an apparent shift away from a traditional orientation for syllabus design has been observed. Minimaly, in the traditional model priority is given to linguistic elements and structural complexity is mainly regarded as a basis of sequencing content, while in communicative language teaching models (including a learner-centered approach), tasks are selected prior to considering linguistic elements. In fact, in a learner-centered curriculum, the three central stages such as grouping learners, content selection, and grading content (task selection) are interrelated in a very complex manner. For instance, grouping learners according to their proficiency, goals, learning styles and other traits may take place almost at the same time or parallel with the task selection stage or even with content selection unfinished. Or content selection and task selection can be completed simultaneously once grouping learners is finished. Such procedures are not linear. It is suggested that learning content and task selection can be processed or determined in tandem (Nunan 1989). There is, however, little empirical evidence to rely on in determining task difficulty in a precise way. Hence presently most decisions are largely intuitive and subjective, which can hardly escape from criticisms.

Evaluation

Evaluation, regarded as a crucial component in any educational contexts, is given a very important place in a learner-centered curriculum. To evaluate a language program, a great deal of information at various stages needs to be elicited. Evaluation takes place at various levels, from the macro-level of programs such as regional or national administrative concerns to the micro-level, such as each local school management or even at the classroom activities level. However, the primary focus will be placed in this section on issues concerning the micro level. Conducting evaluation entails two principal reasons. The first is to explain and confirm existing procedures. And the other is to collect necessary and hopefully sufficient data to bring about innovation and change. So evaluation can be viewed as not only a simple process of data gathering, but a process of decision making.

Evaluation is believed to include student learning assessment function. Some researchers differentiate the terms of assessment and evaluation, and some researchers and practitioners use them interchangeably. In this work, the differentiating stance is taken. In Richards et. al. (1992), assessment is defined as a form of measurement of the ability of a person or the quality of success of a teaching course, and evaluation as the systematic gathering of information for purposes of decision making. Now it is clarified that evaluation goes beyond assessment, but this should not be taken to mean assessment is useless. Nunan (1988: 130) stresses the importance of helping learners to be able to assess their own learning achievement. He emphasizes as follows:

Learners can be sensitized to their role as learner, and can be also assisted to develop as autonomous learners by the systematic use of self assessment (ibid.).

If learners should be able to tell whether or not their learning is satisfactory, or whether or not their learning objectives are attained, or whether or not their way of being taught meets their needs, they must be told well in time what they
will be or have been taught. Learner-centered approach takes it for very important that learners grow to be independent enough to control their own learning process. Autonomous learners know what and how to learn. Such learners know when and where to learn as well. It will be a teachers’ job to assist their learners to become aware of such illuminative significance to become good learners. Teachers should be of great help, not any form of hindrance to their growth.

Brown elaborates on how evaluation works in a systematic approach to curriculum design (1989: 234). Brown sees evaluation as the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum and evaluate its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants’ attitudes within the context of the particular institutions involved (op. cit.: 241). In his model of the curriculum design, with foremost emphasis placed evaluation, has close relationships to all the elements (see Figure 2).

In an ideal situation, curriculum development would start with a thorough needs analysis and then progress through the steps shown in Figure 2. Most likely, however, is the ongoing process of a language program with scars or vague segmentation between each element. So evaluation should be conducted constantly, both formally and informally, so that sufficient information can be collected. This should not be taken to mean that there would hardly be any plausible evaluation work. Or rather, as Brown emphasizes (ibid. 236), the ongoing evaluation is the glue that connects and holds all of the elements together. Without evaluation, which is viewed by Brown as the heart of the systematic approach to language curriculum design, there will be no cohesion among the elements, and any of the elements, constituting the language teaching program, may turn out to be pointless.

![Figure 2. Curriculum Designing and Evaluation (after Brown 1989)](image_url)

**Conclusion**

As clarified in discussing sequencing content, it would entail a lot of arguments and empirical research to attempt to arrange learning content according to learners’ needs. This would not imply, however, that content selection on the basis of learners’ needs is utterly impossible. As Nunan suggests (1993 pp. 56-62), a flexible approach to content selection and gradation would enable teachers to develop learners’ needs based learning tasks. This developmental process is in tandem so that content can suggest tasks and vice versa (Nunan 1983. 16). This means that the whole process of curriculum development should be fully reflective to learners’ cognitive and metacognitive (including affective and psycholinguistic domains) elements. This broader view on curriculum development, presumably, supports the rationales of communicative language learning and teaching. All of the elements of the language education curriculum should function closely related with each other. So evaluation should be made in each element.
and each related area and cluster. Simply put, a diversity of learners' needs will require a teacher to accept diversified learning objectives and to adapt diversified ways of teaching methods. Some may want to learn grammar in a very explicit way, and some prefer to learn the same content inductively. Such extreme dispositions seem to degrade the substantial characteristics of a learner-centered approach. Here it is important to note that a learner-centered approach is not an all-or-nothing-process (Nunan and Lamb 1996: 12). Nunan and Lamb continue as follows: rather it is a continuum from relatively less to relatively more learner-centered (op. cit.).

Some criticisms against learner-centeredness revolve around the needs analysis procedure and its reliability and feasibility. Tudor insists that a teacher, if she adopts a learner-centered approach, should be able to use a variety of needs analysis and self-assessment procedures (1996: 248). And as O'Neil demonstrates, learner-centered language teaching is very often apt to end up with superficial manifestations of the methodology, such as minimal teacher intervention, ample peer talk, exposure to authentic English and so forth, and rather turn out to be a 'student-neglect' approach. This implies a basic problematic feature of learner-centeredness. It will be all up to how each teacher captures the rationales and philosophies of a learner-centered approach. Teachers with a learner-centered approach in mind should be readily open to learners' variability and also be equipped with needed pedagogical insights and technical facilities. An organized group of teachers, an institutionalized body of language learning facilitators, or whatever teachers and their group might be called, teachers should be responsible for their learners' learning by the same token as discussed hitherto regarding the learners' responsibility as a language learner.

References


Abstract

This paper illustrates an outline of a learner-centered language teaching approach and presents some speculations regarding how to develop a learner-centered language curriculum. Some working definitions of such an approach are shown and how basic ideas of learner-centeredness were realized in a nation-wide ESL curriculum innovation in Australia. This will show how each phase of the curriculum development was attained along with efforts made by relevant per-
sonnel. This can be viewed parallel with further developments of rationales and philosophies of a learner centered approach. Some more detailed curriculum development procedures are followed and crucial aspects of each development stage are discussed to explore some intrinsic features of learner-centeredness.

key words: learner centered language teaching, needs analysis, curriculum innovations, the AMEP, learner training, content selection, task difficulty, program evaluation